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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

18 December 1967

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: What Are the Soviets up to in Yemen?*

CONCLUSIONS

A. We think that the aim of the Soviets in Yemen is to save as much as possible of the investment they have made since 1962 in a republican regime in that country. Beyond this, they probably also see in the developing situation in the Peoples' Republic of South Yemen a reason for seeking to maintain a position in Yemen itself.

B. The Soviets probably believe that they can pursue their aims at comparatively small expense or risk. We believe they will provide the Yemeni republicans with arms, equipment, and training but will severely limit commitment of their own nationals to combat.

* This memorandum was prepared by the Office of National Estimates. It was coordinated with the Office of Current Intelligence and with the Clandestine Services.

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DISCUSSION

1. The June war in the Middle East jeopardized the Soviet position in the area as a whole and in Egypt and Yemen in particular, positions which had been gained by long and expensive endeavor and which the Soviets must have regarded as being of some importance. The UAR's heavy military investment on behalf of the Republican regime in Yemen since 1962 was in large part out of the Russian exchequer. Immediately after the death of the old Imam in 1962 the Soviets provided some advisers and some crews for bomber aircraft used against Royalist positions. Until recently, however, the Russians' military dealings with the Yemenis have been mainly through the Egyptians.

2. The compulsions upon Nasser to withdraw from Yemen were so great that the Soviets could not reasonably object, unless they were willing to put up the money to meet his financial needs arising from the war. Whether the Soviets and the Egyptians consulted on the manner of the withdrawal and the future of the Republican government is not clear. It would appear that the Egyptians proceeded to abandon their enterprise in the Yemen without much concern for the future of the Republic. The fact

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that they had no arrangement with the Soviets for leaving weapons behind suggests that there was little or no joint planning.

3. Because of the closure of the Suez Canal, the only ready way the USSR could come to the aid of the new Republican regime in Yemen was by a substantial airlift. Furthermore, the Royalist threat to Sana was so critical that airstrikes were the only way to repulse the attack. Since the Yemeni Republicans lacked pilots capable of performing the task at hand, the Soviets were obliged to supply pilots as well as aircraft. These airstrikes, plus forays outward from Sana with the little armor still in Yemeni Republican hands, have for the time being blunted the attack on the capital, though the Royalists are on the offensive in other parts of the country.

4. Why have the Soviets at this time and in this manner moved to support the Yemeni Republic? Clearly they have long desired to extend their influence in southern Arabia, and the assistance they have given Nasser is partly for this reason. They certainly do not want to see a "progressive" Republican regime destroyed. They may believe that the regime, with a modest amount of support, has a fair chance of maintaining control in at least part of the country. The Soviets probably know that

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the Saudis have continued to pay money to the Royalist forces in Yemen these past months and that arms for the Royalists have at least passed through Saudi Arabia if they have not come from Saudi Arabia. The Soviets may believe that the US is behind such support of the Royalists. They must judge that a victory for the Royalists would mean at the very least the establishment of a conservative, anti-Communist government, which they could only regard as a setback to their own interests. They probably consider also that they stand to gain a good deal of influence and prestige among other Arabs if the Republican regime survives with their help. They may even believe that if the Yemeni Republican Government remains in power they can effectively though discreetly dominate it.

5. More specifically, it is possible that the Soviets have some aims for use of Yemeni territory in the future. They may wish to have the use of Yemeni ports or airfields to support clandestine operations in Africa or the Arabian Peninsula. A port with refueling facilities may be of some importance to them, although Hudaydah's entrance channel limits its use to vessels of moderate size. A combination of such military or para-military uses could add up to a Soviet "base" or facility, even though it almost certainly would not be called one.

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6. The Soviet decision must nevertheless have taken into account various unpromising factors in the situation. The Egyptians had failed ignominiously, even though they could claim to be Arabs and had a leader with great appeal to anti-Royalist Yemenis. It seems unlikely that the Soviets would contemplate carrying on as extensive a campaign as the Egyptians did, even granting their much greater military skills. Furthermore, the Yemeni Republican regime is a weak reed. It may be an improvement over Sallal's government, but it will have many enemies, even among anti-Royalists. And the war between the Republicans and the Royalists will certainly go on. Right now it seems likely that the Royalists can continue to hold the upper hand in the wilder areas of the country and press the Republicans hard even in those places like Sana where they are best able to take advantage of the few modern weapons they have and where Soviet air support is most effective. Even with an optimistic view of the situation, the Soviets can hardly expect a Republican victory throughout the country.

7. Altogether, we think the most likely explanation of Soviet moves to support the Yemeni Republicans is that they are reacting to the distress of a "progressive" regime. Their action

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is relatively inexpensive, involves little risk, and can quite readily be abandoned. The necessary airlift is no great burden for the Soviets. It will, for a time at least, avert the collapse of the republican cause; it may, if things develop favorably, lead eventually to control of at least the southern part of Yemen by a radical government. The commitment of Soviet pilots probably required harder thinking, but the precedent for foreign nationals to fight at the invitation of the recognized government of another country has been well established. We believe that the Soviets will provide the Yemeni republicans with arms, equipment, and training, but will severely limit commitment of their own nations to combat.

8. Apart from considerations affecting Yemen itself, the present uncertain situation in the newly formed Peoples' Republic of South Yemen probably provides the Soviets with a further reason for seeking to maintain a position in Yemen. A good deal of jockeying among rival elements within the PRSY government is still likely before its make-up becomes clear, and the orientation of the resulting regime will almost certainly be subject to influence by outside forces. The Soviets' presence in the Yemen might help them affect political developments in the neighboring

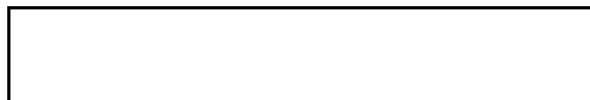
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country. This in turn might lead to predominant influence in Southwest Arabia, perhaps by way of encouragement to the union of Yemen and South Yemen. Success in this area would help to advance the general Soviet position in the Middle East.

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